Basic Government Processes

Heather Sachs, National Down Syndrome Congress
Chris Masey, Coalition for Texans with Disabilities
Agenda

- Branches of government
- The legislative branch
- Leadership & Committees
- How a bill becomes a law
- State & local governments
3 BRANCHES of GOVERNMENT

Constitution (provides a separation of powers)

Legislative (makes laws)
- Congress
  - Senate: 100 elected senators total; 2 senators per state
  - House of Representatives: 435 elected representatives total; representatives based on each state’s population

Executive (carries out laws)
- President
- Vice President
- Cabinet

Judicial (evaluates laws)
- Supreme Court: 9 justices nominated by the president and must be approved by the Senate (with at least 51 votes)
- Other Federal Courts

Created by Kids.gov
The U.S. Congress

- **Bicameral** – 2 chambers
- Senate
  - 100 members
  - 2 per state
  - 6 year term
- House
  - 435
  - 2 year term
  - Tied to population of state
Congressional Duties

• Make the laws
• Represent their constituents
Powers of Congress

- Taxes
- Money
- Regulate trade
- Declare war
- Military & national guard
- Post office
- Run all federal property
Congressional Leadership – House, 115th Congress

Majority (Republican)
Speaker – Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI)
Majority Leader – Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA)
Majority Whip – Rep. Steve Scalise (R-LA)
Conference Chair – Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA)
Policy Committee Chair – Rep. Luke Messer (R-IN)

Minority (Democrat)
Minority Leader – Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)
Democratic Whip - Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD)
Assistant Democratic Leader – Rep. James Clyburn (D-SC)
Democratic Caucus Chairman – Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-NY)
Congressional Leadership - Senate

Majority (Republican)
• Majority Leader – Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY)
• Majority Whip – Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX)

Minority (Democrat)
• Minority Leader – Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY)
• Minority Whip – Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL)
Key Committees - Senate

- Appropriations – funding for gov’t programs
- Budget
- Finance – taxation, debt, Social Security (Medicaid, SSI, SSDI)
- Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP)
- Veterans’ Affairs
Key Committees - House

• Appropriations
• Budget
• Education & Labor (“Ed & Workforce”)
• Energy & Commerce (“E&C”)
• Veterans’ Affairs
• Ways & Means – tax-writing
• Rules – sets rules for bills that come to the floor
How a Bill Becomes a Law

Schoolhouse Rock video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nKyihoV9z8
Step 1: An Idea

- Each “bill” starts out as an idea.
- These ideas can come from Congress, private citizens or from the White House (i.e. The President).
- Special Interest Groups (groups of individuals who try to influence Congress) may also present ideas to Congress that may become bills.
Step 2: Introduction

- The idea is “drafted” (written) as a bill.

- The bill must be **introduced by a Senator or House Member**.

- Every bill is given a title and number when it is introduced – **H.R.1** or **S.1**
Step 3: Committee

• After it is introduced, each “bill” is then sent to the committee that seems most qualified to handle it.
• Committees and subcommittees research, revise and debate bills.
  – Hearings, briefings
• Choices:
  – Reject it immediately
  – Sit on it
  – Approve it
    (with or without changes)
Step 4: Floor Debate

• Bill approved by committee goes to the “floor” to be voted on by the full House of Representatives or the full Senate.
• Members of Congress debate pros and cons
• Add amendments, riders (a completely unrelated item to the bill- Senate only)
• Filibuster (Senate only) – Senator ties to “talk a bill to death”
Step 5: Vote

• A simple **majority vote** is all that is needed to pass a bill.

• If either chamber refuses to pass it, the bill dies.

• Bills passed in each chamber must be identical

• If different versions are passed in each chamber, the bill goes to a “conference committee” which results in a compromise bill
Step 6: Presidential Action

• Approval:
  – Sign bill into law
  – Do nothing: approval after 10 days if Congress in session

• Rejection:
  – Veto
  – Do nothing: “Pocket veto” after 10 days

• Note: 2/3 of Congress can override a veto!
State Governments

• The primary responsibilities of state governments are:
  – education
  – public health
  – transportation
  – economic development
  – criminal justice
  – the licensing and regulation of professions
    (teachers, social workers, doctors, lawyers, barbers/stylists, architects, etc.)

• Governors are the chief executive officers of the states
State Legislatures

• Most states are bicameral (2 chambers)
• Mostly part-time; session length varies (30 days – 12 months)
• Most meet annually; some meet bi-annually
• Process varies by state but generally similar to federal process
How a bill becomes a law in Texas

Bill is introduced in the HOUSE
Led by House Speaker Joe Straus

- Bill is referred to a House Committee by the Speaker, where it may be amended.
- If the bill passes through the committee, it goes to calendars committee for scheduling for House floor debate.
- Bill is brought to the House floor for debate where it may be further amended.
- If passed by majority vote, the bill is sent to the Senate.

Bill is introduced in the SENATE
Led by Lt. Governor Dan Patrick

- Bill is referred to a Senate Committee by the Lt. Gov., where it may be amended.
- If the bill passes through the committee, Senators must agree by 3/5’s vote to send the bill to the Senate floor for debate.
- Bill is brought to the Senate floor for debate where it may be further amended.
- If passed by majority vote, the bill is sent to the House.

All Bills must pass through the Senate & the House to become law

Once a bill with agreed upon language is passed by the House and Senate, the bill is sent to the Governor.

The Governor may:
1. Sign the bill into law;
2. Allow the bill to become law without his signature; or
3. Veto the bill (A veto can be overridden if the bill received a 2/3’s vote in the House and Senate).

Gov. Greg Abbott

National Down Syndrome Congress
Local Governments

- Public administration of towns, cities, counties & districts
- Get their authority from the state constitution
- Primary responsibilities
  - City utilities
  - Libraries
  - Fire departments
  - Local law enforcement
  - Parks

- Local governments have some or all of the following decision-making positions:
  - Elected executive: mayor, village president.
  - Elected council or commission: city council, school board, county board.
  - Appointed manager: city manager, school superintendent.
Thank you!

Heather Sachs – heather@ndsccenter.org
Chris Masey – cmasey@txdisabilities.org